COMMUNICATIONS EFFECTIVENESS: ACTIVE LISTENING AND SENDING FEELING MESSAGES

(By Jack N. Wismer)

"I know you believe that you understand what you think I said, but I am not sure you realize that what you heard is not what I meant."

When a person communicates a message to another person, the message usually contains two elements: content and feeling. Both elements are important because both give the message meaning. However, we often do not understand other people's messages or are misunderstood by others because we forget that meanings are in people, not in words.

The Risk of Communicating Non-acceptance:

The communication of mutual acceptance is vital to developing and maintaining work and personal relationships. However, various ways of responding to situations run the risk of communicating non-acceptance. To understand a person's point of view effectively, it is necessary not to communicate non-acceptance. According to Gordon (1970, pp. 41-44), author of several books on active listening, most people, in a listening situation, commonly respond in one or more of the following twelve ways: [1]

1. *Ordering, Directing*: "You have to..."
2. Warning, *Threatening*: You'd better not..."
3. *Preaching, Moralizing*: "You ought to..."
4. *Advising, Giving Solutions*: "Why don't you..."
5. *Lecturing, Informing:* "Here are the facts..."
6. *Evaluating, Blaming:* "You're wrong..."
7. *Praising, Agreeing*: "You're right..."
8. *Name-calling Shaming*: "You're stupid..."
9. *Interpreting, Analyzing:* "What you need..."
10. *Sympathizing, Supporting*: "You'll be OK..."
11. *Questioning, Probing:* "Why did you..."
12. *Withdrawing, Avoiding*: "Let's forget it..."
13.

These modes of response may communicate to the sender that it is not acceptable to feel the way he or she

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[1]Abstracted from Thomas Gordon's Parent *Effectiveness Training*, Peter H. Wyden, New York, 1970. Reprinted by permission of Jossey-Bass, Inc. a subsidiary of John Wiley and Sons, Inc. From: *Pfeiffer/the 1972 Annual Handbook for Group Facilitators*, Pages173-17

feels. If the sender perceives one of these messages as indicating non-acceptance, there is a risk will become defensive about new ideas, will be resistive to changing behavior, will tend to justify certain feelings, or will turn silent because the listener is perceived as only passively interested in the sender.

ACTIVE LISTENING

A more effective way of responding to a listening situation is called "active listening." Gordon (1970) defines active listening as a communication skill to help people solve their own problems. In active listening, the listener is involved with the sender's need to communicate. To be effective, the listener must take an "active" responsibility to understand the content and feeling of what is being said. The listener can respond with a statement, in his own words, of what he feels the sender's message means. For example:

Sender: "The deadline for this report is not realistic!"

Listener: "You feel you're pressured to get the report done."

If the listener is to understand the sender's meaning, he will need to "put himself in the other person's place." Feeding back perceptions of intended meaning allows the listener to check the accuracy of his listening and understanding.

Benefits of Active Listening:

An open communication climate for understanding is created through active listening. The listener can learn to see what a person means and how the person feels about situations and problems. Active listening is a skill that can communicate acceptance and increase interpersonal trust among people. It can also facilitate problem solving. Therefore, the appropriate use of active listening increases the communication effectiveness of people.

Pitfalls in Active Listening:

Active listening is not intended to manipulate people to behave or think the way others think they should. The listener also should not "parrot" someone's message by repeating the exact words used. Empathy is a necessary ingredient--the listener should communicate warmth toward and feeling about the sender's message by putting himself in the sender's place. Timing is another pitfall; active listening is not appropriate when there is no time to deal with the situation or when someone is asking only for factual information. Also, it is important that the listener be sensitive to nonverbal messages abort the right time to stop giving feedback. Avoiding these common pitfalls will make “active listening” a more effective communication skill.

Principle of Problem Ownership:

Since active listening is most appropriate when a person expresses feelings about a problem, it is necessary to ask who owns the problem. The principle of problem ownership can be demonstrated in the following situations.

1. Person A's needs are not being satisfied by his or her own behavior, and A's behavior does not directly interfere with Person B's satisfaction of his or her own needs. Therefore, A owns the problem.

2. Person A's needs are being satisfied, but his or her behavior interferes in some way with Person B's satisfaction of his or her own needs and thus creates a problem for B. B then owns the problem

Person A is satisfying his or her own needs, and his or her behavior does not directly interfere with Person B's needs. In this case, there is no problem.

Active listening is very useful, but it is not appropriate to use if another person's behavior is creating the problem.

COMMUNICATING ONE'S NEEDS

Ineffective Approaches:

It is necessary for the person who owns the problem to know how to confront it and communicate his or her needs so that other people will listen. However, people frequently confront problems in a way that tends to stimulate defensiveness and resistance. The two most common approaches:

1. *Evaluating*--which communicates judgment, blame, ridicule, or shame ("Don't you know how to use that machine?"' "You're late again!"). This method has several risks: (a) it makes people defensive and resistant to further communication; (b) it implies power over the other person; and (c) it threatens and reduces the other person's self-esteem.

2. Sending solutions--which communicates what the other person should do rather than what the speaker is feeling ("If you don't come in on time, I'll have to report you"; "Why don't you do it this way?"). Sending solutions carries risks: (a) people become resistive if they are told what to do, even if they agree with the solution; (b) this approach indicates that the sender's needs are more important than the receiver's; (c) it communicates a lack of trust in other people's capacities to solve their own problems; and (d) it reduces the responsibility to define the problem clearly and explore feasible alternatives to a problem.

A More Effective Approach:

Problems can be confronted and one's needs can be made known without making other people feel defensive. An effective communication message involves three components: (1) owning feelings, (2) sending feelings, and (3) describing behavior.

Ownership of feelings focuses on "who owns the problem." The sender of a message needs to accept responsibility for his or her own feelings. Messages that own the sender's feelings usually begin with or contain "I."

Sometimes, communicating feelings is viewed as a weakness, but the value of sending feelings is communicating honesty and openness by focusing on the problem and not evaluating the person.

Describing behavior concentrates on what one person sees and hears and feels about another person's behavior as it affects the observer's feelings and behavior. The focus is on specific situations that relate to specific times and places.

It is useful to distinguish between descriptions and evaluations of behavior. The italicized parts of the next statements illustrate *evaluations* of behavior:

"I can't finish this report *if you are so inconsiderate as to interrupt me*."
"*You're a loudmouth."* The italicized parts of the following statements are *descriptions* of behavior:
"I can't finish this report *if you constantly interrupt me*."
"I feel that *you talked considerably during the meetings."*

A design for sending feeling messages can be portrayed as follows.

Ownership + Feeling Word + Description of Behavior = Feeling Message

Example:

> *I* (ownership) am *concerned* (feeling word) about *finishing this report on time*" (description of behavior)

The effectiveness of feeling messages can be attributed to several factors:

- "I" messages are more effective because they place responsibility with the sender of the message.
- "I" messages reduce the other person's defensiveness and resistance to further communication.
- Behavioral descriptions provide feedback about the other person's behavior but do not evaluate it.
- Although "I" messages require some courage, they honestly express the speaker's feelings.
- Feeling messages promote open communication in work and personal relationships.

SUMMARY

Sending feeling messages and listening actively are skills that can be applied to work, family, and personal relationships.

> No one is wrong. At most someone is uninformed. If I think a man is wrong, either I am unaware of something, or he is. So unless I want to play a superiority game I had best find out what he is looking at.
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> "You're wrong" means "I don't understand you" I'm not sending what you're seeing. But there is nothing wrong with you, you are simply not me and that's not wrong. (Prather, 1970, unpaged)[2]

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[2] From *Notes to Myself* by Hugh Prather. Copyright © 1970 by Real People Press. Used with permission.

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THE ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF AN I-MESSAGE

(By Dr. Thomas Gordon)

Have you ever had people confront you by telling you only how they felt--nothing more--such as.

- "I'm upset with you."
- "I'm really disappointed."
- "I am worried."
- "I am unhappy with you."

Such messages leave everyone puzzled and bewildered, so your first response was probably to ask *why* the confronter was upset, disappointed, worried, or unhappy. Or perhaps you responded with "What did I do?" The point is that telling a person only how you *feel* is an incomplete confrontation; it contains only one of the three components of a complete I-message: (1) brief description of the *behavior* you find unacceptable, (2) your honest *feelings* and (3) the tangible and concrete *effect* of the behavior on you (the consequences).

Obviously, to eliminate the necessity for the question, "What did I do?" you need to inform the person exactly what *behavior* you find unacceptable. Secondly, a direct and honest *expression of your feelings* is usually required in order to underscore the degree of emotional impact which the unacceptable behavior had on you. Lastly, you need to include the *effect* (or consequences) component in order to convince the person that you really have a logical, rational reason for wanting a behavior change (that your life is actually affected in some tangible and concrete way).

When people learn how to send I-messages, they find it extremely useful to remember this I-message formula: BEHAVIOR + FEELINGS + EFFECTS, not necessarily in that order.

During the initial phase of learning to send complete three-part I-messages you will feel self-conscious and mechanical. Gradually, with practice, they will come much more naturally and require less deliberate thought. But practice is required, as with almost any new skill: learning a new golf swing or tennis stroke, sailing a boat, learning to ski, or operating a calculator.

In the following example, taken from an interview with a plant manager, you will see a good three-part I-message and also get a feel for the changed attitudes of the supervisor towards his people:

> "I have an old employee who thinks all the time he can remember numbers. His work is in the storeroom, and he feels he has it all stored up here in his memory. And his memory isn't that good, 'cause he consistently comes up with wrong numbers–more so than the new employee s who don't trust their memory and look up and check and write down the right numbers. By bringing him is and setting him down, I think I have got the problem across to ho him. And it has helped some. I told him, 'we've got a problem out there because you've gotten quite a few wrong tickets, and I'm really concerned about the background. And I said, 'As I grow older my memory isn't as good.' Now I didn't accuse him that his memory was flipping, and I think I brought it out in a roundabout way

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without putting him on the defensive. Well, he agreed that we had a problem and that it caused a lot of errors in our inventory. And it helped some, yes. I think he left with a better feeling, a better taste in his mouth than if I had given him the old 'Better straighten up and fly right or else' approach, you know. I think I don't underestimate the intelligence of people under me. That's on fallacy of management–they underplay or underrate people. I'll admit I had a little of that when I first became foreman, but now I realize that they actually are intelligent people.... I think anytime you can talk to someone in a way that doesn't downgrade him, you keep his respect. I feel he responds a hell of a lot better than when you say, 'I'm your boss and you do this or that.' If you can get to him in a way that he feels you're on a man-to-man basis and you've got a problem and you're only trying to solve it."

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU SEND I-MESSAGES?

When you set out to influence someone to change by sending an I-message, a number of things can happen. Your initial message is only the first step in the change process, but it is important because it is the tone for what may come later. For this discussion, I will sometimes use the terms "changer" and "changee."

Who Owns the Problem?

It is essential that you keep in mind the fundamental concept of "problem ownership." When you decided to try to change another person whose behavior is interfering with your getting your needs met, *you* own the problem, not the changee. The changee does not have a problem; indeed, he is getting *his* needs met by doing the very thing that causes you not to get *your* needs met. You can't blame a person for meeting his needs--it's the way people function. So don't be upset with *the person* whose behavior causes you a problem, although you are perfectly justified in being upset with *the fact* that you have a problem. This is the attitude that gets communicated by your non-blaming I-message, as opposed to a blaming you-message.

The Changee Is in the Driver's Seat

Although you assume responsibility for confronting the changee with the fact that you have a problem, in the final analysis it is the changee who ultimately must make the decision whether to change or not. The "locus of responsibility" resides in the changee. Because you have the problem, you are in fact *dependent on the changee.* Again, the I-message effectively and accurately communicates this attitude; it is a statement of your problem but does not tell the changee he must change or how he must change. Again I-messages are *appeals for help,* and this accounts for their often amazing potency. Most people respond better to honest appeals for help than to demands, threats, solutions, or lectures.

The Importance of "Shifting Gears"

Although I-messages are more likely to influence others to change than You-messages, still it is a fact that being confronted with the prospect of having to change is often disturbing to the changee. A common response of the changee to your I-message is to become anxious, upset, defensive, hurt, apologetic, or resistive, as in the following two examples:

1. Changer: I was really upset when I found several critical errors in your report because it made me look foolish at the board meeting where I presented the report.

Change: Well, you wanted it in such a hurry I did not have time to double-check all my calculations.

2. Changer: When I hear complaints from patients that you are not answering their call light immediately, I get upset because I would hate to be held responsible for something bad happening to one of our patients.
Change: I can't be in two places at the same time and besides some of our patients call us for things they can do themselves.

In both situations, even your perfectly good I-message provoked defensiveness and some degree of hostility. Your I-message caused the changee a problem. Not at all unusual--people rarely like to be told their behavior is unacceptable, no matter how it is worded. When people resist changing, it is generally useless to keep hammering at them with subsequent I-messages; what is called for at such times is a quick shift to Active Listening. In these two situations the shift might sound something like:

1. Changer: You were under such a time bind, you felt you couldn't take the time to check your figures, is that right?

2. Changer: You mean you can't see the call light when you're in another patient's room. And I also gather you get irritated when patients call you to do things for them they could do themselves.

This shifting from a sending posture to a listening posture, which in our L.E.T. course is called "shifting gears," serves several extremely important functions in confronting situations.

1. It communicates that the changer has understood and accepted (not agreed with, of course) the changee's position--his or her feelings, defenses, and reasons. This greatly increases the changee's willingness to understand and accept the changer's position. ("He listened to me, now I'll listen to him.")

2. It helps dissipate the changee's emotional response (hurt, embarrassment, anger, regret), paving the way for possible change or, as I shall later describe, mutual problem-solving.

3. It results, not infrequently, in a change in the *changer's* attitude from previously finding the other's behavior unacceptable to later seeing it as acceptable. ("Oh, I now see why you miss some of the patient's call lights--you can't see them.")

After the changer has shifted gears to Active Listening, it might be appropriate to repeat the original I-message or send a modified one. ("I understand why you didn't recheck your calculations, but I still can't accept reports with incorrect figures.")
Here is an example of effective gear shifting, reported by a supervisor who previously found it hard to confront people:

"I found it very difficult at first—actually using I-messages and then switching to Active Listening. Because I didn't like people to become very hostile with me. But it worked out very well one day at work. A girl came into my office when I was really busy working; I was under a lot of pressure. And this person likes to come in and sit and talk. If it hadn't been for L.E.T. and the Active Listening I probably never would have known how to handle the situation. So she came in, she sat down, and I delivered her an I-message: 'When you come into my office to sit down and talk, I can't get my work done and that

really upsets me.' And so her automatic response was defensive and she in turn said, 'Well, what I wanted to talk about is also of concern to you.' And I kept above the emotion level and actively listened to her: 'Sounds like you're upset with me?' Yes, she was, she said. And I said, 'You feel hurt by my not wanting to listen to this issue right now.' And she said, 'Yes, I am hurt. I know you're busy, but surely you've got enough time for me.' And we came to the solution that we'd meet for lunch. So that worked out very well . . . I guess I felt really good because this was the first time I had used an I-message in the work environment and been able to handle the defensiveness not as a direct slam on myself. It's a frightening thing to have to confront somebody with an issue. But once you start to realize that people normally will get defensive and that they can be talked into backing down by listening--I started to feel confident that I could deliver an I-message and then dwell on the other person's feeling, not my own."

Having learned in the L.E.T. class that people do frequently respond with defensiveness when confronted, this supervisor was able to overcome her fear of confrontation.

THE LOST ART OF FEEDBACK

The ability and willingness to communicate effectively is the key to supervisory success. Although communication effectiveness is based on the ability to make and maintain effective contact, regardless of the situation, specific areas of communications require some additional thought and planning.

One of the most important tools for maintaining control and developing people is the proper use of feedback. Although feedback has been categorized as positive and negative, another way of viewing it is to classify it into *supportive* feedback (which reinforces an ongoing behavior) and *corrective* feedback (which indicates that a change in behavior is appropriate). In this sense, all feedback is positive. The purpose of all feedback should be to assist an individual in maintaining or enhancing his or her present level of effectiveness of appropriateness.

Some feedback, by definition, is better than no feedback. There are, however, ways to do it well and ways to do it superbly. This article presents some guidelines that can help to sharpen the process. The most important function of feedback is to help the individual who is receiving the feedback to keep in touch with what is going on in the environment.

Supportive Feedback

Supportive feedback is used to reinforce behavior that is effective and desirable. An axiom of effective supervision is "Catch them doing something right and let them know it" (Blanchard & Johnson, 1982). One of the most damaging and erroneous assumptions that many supervisors make is that good performance and appropriate behavior are to be expected from the employee and that the only time feedback is needed is when the employee does something wrong. Therefore, these supervisors never give supportive feedback. If a supervisor, however, were determined to give only one kind of feedback, he or she would be ahead to choose supportive feedback and let corrective feedback go. In other words, if a supervisor stresses errors only, the end result would be-at most-an attempt by employees to do standard, error-free work. This accomplishment would not be *bad*, but there is a better way.

If a supervisor concentrated on what the employees were doing well, then superior work is what the employees would become aware of. They would begin to view their work in terms of performing as well and as creatively as possible. What is reinforced has a tendency to become stronger. What is not reinforced has a tendency to face away. If excellence is actively reinforced and errors are simply mentioned, employees will focus on excellence and tend to diminish errors. The following example of the two types of feedback illustrates the difference.

> *Focus on errors*: "The last three pieces in that batch contained wrong figures. We cannot have that kind of sloppy work in this department."
>
> *Focus on good work*: "This batch looks good, except for the last three pieces, which contained wrong figures. You probably used the wrong formula. Take them back and check them out, just the way you did the first group."

Fortunately, however, no one has to make a choice between using only supportive or only corrective feedback. Both are essential and valuable, and it is important to understand how each works so that the maximum gain can be received from the process.

Corrective Feedback

Corrective feedback is used to alter a behavior that is ineffective or inappropriate. It is as essential to growth process as supportive feedback. A corrective feedback session, although never hurtful

if done properly, is not a particularly pleasant experience. Under the best of circumstances, the subordinate will probably feel a little defensive or embarrassed.

In giving corrective feedback, the manager should have an option ready to present. When the employee is made aware of the inappropriate behavior, having an immediate alternative can be effective and powerful in shaping behavior. By presenting the alternative immediately after the corrective feedback, the manager is helping the subordinate to come out of a personally uncomfortable situation in the shortest possible time. This protects the dignity of the subordinate. The manager would also be establishing himself or herself as a supporter of good work and good workers, which would go a long way in developing strong, productive, and supportive working relationships. Also very important, the manager would be presenting an alternative that the employee might never have considered - or that was considered and rejected. This provides for immediate learning. Most important, however, is the fact that the manager would make the employee aware that an alternative was available at the time the employee chose to act otherwise. This awareness can facilitate the employee in taking responsibility for his or her own choices. That is, the employee would realize, "That's right, I could have done it that way." The following example shows how an alternative can be effectively added to the feedback.

"When you snapped at Ann in front of the group, she appeared to be very embarrassed and angry. *When you must remind an employee to be on time, it's less embarrassing for everyone to discuss it with the employee privately after the meeting."*

Guidelines for Effective Feedback

The following guidelines are helpful for managers who are trying to improve their feedback skills, and they may also be used as a review prior to giving feedback.

1. Deal in Specifics

Being specific is the most important rule in giving feedback, whether it is supportive or corrective. Unless the feedback is specific, very little learning or reinforcement is possible. The following examples illustrate the difference in general and specific statements.

General: "I'm glad to see that your work is improving."
Specific: "I'm pleased that you met every deadline in the last three weeks."
General: "You're a very supportive person."
Specific: "I appreciate your taking time to explain the contract to our new employee."
General: "You're falling down on the job again."
Specific: "Last month most of your cost reports were completely accurate, but last week four of your profit/loss figures were wrong."

The last set is, of course, an example of corrective feedback. General statements in corrective feedback frequently result in hostile or defensive confrontations, whereas specific statements set the stage for problem-solving interaction. Carrying the last illustration one step farther, the manager could add an alternative: "Start checking the typed report against the computer printouts. Some of the errors may be typos, not miscalculations."

If the employee is to learn from feedback and respond to it, then he or she must see it in terms of *observable* effects. That is, the employee must be able to see clearly how his or her behavior had a direct impact on the group's performance, morale, etc. When the employee sees the point of the feedback objectively, the issue will be depersonalized, and the employee will be more willing to continue with appropriate behaviors or to modify inappropriate behaviors. Although the manager's personal approval

("I'm glad to see. . .") or disapproval ("I'm disappointed that. . .") can give emphasis to feedback, it must be supported by specific data in order to effect a change in behavior.

2. Focus on Actions, Not Attitudes

Just as feedback must be specific and observable in order to be effective, it must be nonthreatening in order to be acceptable. Although subordinates - like supervisors - are always accountable for their *behavior*, they are never accountable for their attitudes or feelings. Attitudes and feelings cannot be measured, nor can a manager determine if or when an employee's feelings have changed. For feedback to be acceptable, it must respect the dignity of the person receiving the feedback.

No one can attack attitudes without dealing in generalities, and frequently attacks on attitudes result in defensive reactions. The following example illustrates the difference in giving feedback on behavior and giving feedback on attitudes.

Feedback on attitude: "You have been acting hostile toward Jim."
Feedback on behavior: "You threw the papers down on Jim's desk and used profanity."

An attitude that managers often try to measure is loyalty. Certain actions that *seem* to indicate loyalty or disloyalty can be observed, but loyalty is a *result*, not an action. It cannot be demanded; it must be earned. Whereas people have total control over their own behavior, they often exercise little control over their feelings and attitudes. They feel what they feel. If a manager keeps this in mind and focuses more energy on things that can be influenced (i.e., employee behavior), changes are more likely to occur.

The more that corrective feedback is cast in specific behavioral terms, the more it supports problem solving and the easier it is to control. The more that corrective feedback is cast in attitudinal terms, the more it will be perceived as a personal attack and the more difficult it will be to deal with. The more that supportive feedback is cast in terms of specific behaviors, the higher the probability that those behaviors will be repeated and eventually become part of the person's natural way of doing things.

3. Determine the Appropriate Time and Place

Feedback of either type works best if it is given as soon as feasible after the behavior occurs. Waiting decreases the impact that the feedback will have on the behavior. The passage of time may make the behavior seem less important to the manager; other important events begin to drain the energy of the manager and some of the details of the behavior might be forgotten. On the other hand, dwelling on it for a long period could blow it out of proportion. From the subordinates' viewpoint, the longer the wait for the feedback, the less important it must be. The following example illustrates this point.

Tardy feedback: "Several times last month you fell below your quota."
Immediate feedback: "There are only ten products here; your quota for today was fourteen."

Enough time should be allotted to deal with the issues in their entirety. A manager can undercut the effectiveness by looking at the clock and speeding up the input so that an appointment can be met.

Answering the telephone or allowing visitors to interrupt the conversation can have the same effect. The manager can also cause unnecessary stress by telling an employee at ten o'clock in the morning "I want to see you at three this afternoon." A more appropriate procedure would be to say, "Would you please come to my office now" or "When you reach a stopping point, drop by my office. I have something good to tell you."

In addition to an appropriate time, the setting for the feedback is important. The old proverb, "Praise in public, censure in private," is partially correct. Almost without exception, corrective feedback is more appropriately given in private. In the case of supportive feedback, however, discretion is needed. In many instances, praise in public is appropriate and will be appreciated by the subordinate. In other instances, privacy is needed to keep the positive effect from being short-circuited. For example, some people make a virtue out of humility; any feedback that reinforces their sense of worth is embarrassing. Rather than appreciating an audience, this type of employee would find it painful and perhaps resent it.

Sometimes a norm arises in a work group that prevents anyone from making a big deal out of good work. This does not mean that the group does not value good work, but supportive feedback in private might prevent the employee from feeling he or she was responsible for breaking the norm. In other instances, public praise can cause jealousy, hostility, or tense working relationships. Therefore, a conscious decision should be made about whether or not to give the supportive feedback publicly.

Another important consideration is the actual location selected for giving the feedback. The delivery of the feedback should match its importance. If the feedback concerns an important action, the manager's office would be better than an accidental encounter in the hall. On the other hand, the manager might convey a quick observation by telling someone at the water fountain, "Say, that was beautiful artwork on the Madison report." Choosing the time and place is a matter of mixing a little common sense with an awareness of what is going on.

4. Refrain from Inappropriately Including Other Issues

Frequently when feedback is given, other issues are salient. When supportive feedback is given, any topic that does not relate to the specific feedback point should not be discussed if it would undercut the supportive feedback. For example, the manager could destroy the good just accomplished by adding, "And by the way, as long as you are here, I want to ask you to try to keep your files a little neater. While you were away, I couldn't find a thing."

When corrective feedback is given, however, the situation is different. The manager will want the feedback to be absorbed as quickly and as easily as possible, with the employee's negative feelings lasting no longer than necessary. Therefore, as soon as the feedback has been understood and acknowledged, the manager is free to change the subject. The manager may want to add, "I'm glad that you see where the error occurred. Now, as long as you are here, I'd like to ask your opinion about...." This type of statement, when used appropriately, lets the subordinate know that he or she is still valued. Obviously, the manager should not contrive a situation just to add this type of statement, but when the situation is naturally there, the manager is free to take advantage of it.

In certain situations, it is appropriate to give supportive and corrective feedback simultaneously. Training periods of new employees, performance-appraisal sessions, and times when experienced employees are tackling new and challenging tasks are all good examples of times when both types of feedback are appropriate. Nevertheless, some cautions are necessary:

> *Never follow the feedback with the word "but."* It will negate everything that was said before it. If it is appropriate to give supportive and corrective feedback within the same sentence, the clauses should be connected with "and." This method allows both parts of the sentence to be

heard clearly and sets the stage for a positive suggestion. The following examples illustrate the difference.

Connected with but: "Your first report was accurate, but your others should have measured up to it."
Connected with and: "Your first report was accurate, and your others should have measured up to it."
Connected with but: "You were late this morning, but Anderson called to tell you what a great job you did on the Miller account."
Connected with and: "You were late this morning, and Anderson called to tell you what a great job you did on the Miller account."

Alternate the supportive and corrective feedback. When a great deal of feedback must be given, it is frequently better to mix the supportive feedback with the corrective feedback than to give all of one type and then all of the other. Regardless of which types comes first, the latter will be remembered the most clearly. If a chronic self-doubter is first given supportive feedback and then only corrective feedback, he or she is likely to believe the supportive feedback was given just to soften the blow of the other type. Alternating between the two types will make all the feedback seem more genuine.

Where feasible, use the supportive feedback to cushion the corrective feedback. When both types of feedback are appropriate, there is usually no reason to start with corrective feedback. However, this does not mean that corrective feedback should be quickly sandwiched in between supportive feedback statements. Each type is important, but frequently supportive feedback can be used as an excellent teaching device for areas that need correcting. This is especially true if the employee has done a good job previously and then failed later under similar circumstances. For example, the manager might say, "The way you helped Fred to learn the codes when he was transferred to this department would be appropriate in training the new employees."

Principles Feedback

Two major principles govern the use of feedback. The first principle, which relates to how feedback is conducted, can be paraphrased "I can't tell you how you are, and you can't tell me what I see." In other words, the person giving the feedback is responsible to relate the situation as he or she observes it, and the person receiving the feedback is responsible for relating what he or she meant, felt, or thought. The second principle is that feedback supports growth.

Giving Feedback:

"You Can't Tell Me What I See"

The object of giving feedback is not to judge the other person, but to report what was seen and heard and what the effects of the behavior were. Personal approval or disapproval, even if important, is secondary.

Feedback should be given directly to the person for whom it is intended. When others are present, the manager sometimes addresses them almost to the exclusive of the intended recipient, who sits quietly and gathers information by eavesdropping. Good contact with the recipient is an essential element in giving feedback.

It is never necessary to apologize for giving corrective feedback. Corrective or otherwise feedback is a gift; apologies will discount its importance and lessen its impact. Nevertheless, corrective feedback must be given in a way that does not jeopardize the recipient's dignity and sense of self-worth.

It is sometimes helpful to offer an interpretation of the behavior or a hunch about what the behavior might indicate. What is of paramount importance is that the interpretation be offered as a suggestion and *never* as a judgment or clinical evaluation of the person. Only the recipient is capable of putting it into a meaningful context. For example, the manager might say, "When Pete showed you the error you made; you told him it was none of his concern. I wonder if you were mad at Pete for some other reason." This statement shows the recipient the behavior and allows him or her to consider a possible cause for that behavior.

Receiving Feedback:
"You Can't Tell Me How I Am"

From the recipient's viewpoint, the first principle is "You can't tell me how I am, and I can't tell you what you see." Although most people realize that giving feedback correctly requires skill and awareness, they are less aware of the importance of knowing how to receive feedback. When receiving feedback, many people tend to argue about, disown, or attempt to justify the information. Statements like "I didn't say that," "That's not what I meant," and "You don't understand what I was trying to do" are attempts to convince the person giving the feedback that he or she didn't see or observe what he or she claims. However, the recipient needs to understand that the observer-whether manager, peer, or subordinate-is relating what he or she experienced as a result of the recipients behavior. There is nothing wrong with the giver and receiver having different viewpoints. The purpose of feedback is to give a new view or to increase awareness. If an argument ensues and the observer backs down, the recipient is the loser.

The appropriate response, as a rule of thumb, is to say "thank you" when either type of feedback is received. It is also appropriate, of course, to ask for clarity or more detail on any issue.

The purpose of feedback is to help the recipient. Feedback can be thought of as food. It is very nourishing. When people are hungry, food is what they need; but when they are full, food is the last thing they want or need. The same applies to ingesting feedback. When people have had enough, they should call a halt. Attempting to absorb all the feedback that might be available, or that various people would like to give, is like forcing food into a full stomach just because someone says, "Please have some more." The recipient is responsible for demanding specificity in feedback. No feedback should be accepted as legitimate if it cannot be clearly demonstrated by an observable behavior. For example, if someone says, "You're very arrogant," an appropriate response would be "What specifically have I said or done to cause you to think that?" If that response is countered with "I don't know; I just experience you that way," then the accusation should be immediately forgotten. People cannot afford to change just to meet everyone's personal like or expectations.

In fact, it is impossible to change to meet *everyone's* expectations, and the situation becomes compounded as more and more people give the feedback. A single act can generate disparate feedback from different people who observe the behavior. For example, a loud exclamation could be viewed as appropriately angry by one person; overly harsh, by another; and merely uncouth, by a third. Each person will see it from his or her unique perspective. Therefore feedback requires action from both the giver and the receiver. Only the giver can tell what he or she observed or experienced, and only the recipient can use the information in deciding whether or not to change the behavior.

For feedback to be effective, the receiver must hear what the giver is saying, weigh it, and then determine whether or not the information is relevant. The following example illustrates how this can be done.

> *Department manager*: "Waste in your unit is up by 4 percent. Are you having any problems with your employees?"

Supervisor: "I was not aware of the waste increase. No, I am not having trouble with my employees. I suppose I have been focusing on the quality so much that I lost sight of the waste figures. Thanks for bringing this to my attention.

Feedback Supports Growth

The second major principle, "feedback supports growth," is important, because we cannot always see ourselves as others see us. Although an individual may be the world's foremost authority on himself or herself, there are still parts of the individual that are more obvious to other people. Although people may be more aware of their own needs and capabilities and more concerned about their own welfare than other people are, they are able to stretch themselves and grow if they pay attention to feedback from others. Although feedback may be extremely uncomfortable at the time, the individual can look back later and realize the feedback was the spark that inspired the change that turned his or her career or personal life in a different direction. If the feedback is not rejected or avoided, recipients can discover and develop ways to work that they did not think were available.

Feedback Strategies

The strategies suggested here are not step-by-step procedures to be blindly followed. Their purpose is to help in planning and organizing an approach to dealing with an issue. They offer a logical and effective sequence of events for the feedback session. The person planning the session must decide on the desired future objective. (The "future," however, could be five minutes after the session or two years later.) During the feedback session, attention must be focused on what is happening in terms of the outcome. That is, the focus must be on obtaining the goal, not on sticking to the strategy. This focus allows the giver to change tactics or even modify the original strategy if conditions change or unforeseen events occur. After the strategy is selected, the following three rules should be kept in mind:

1. Be clear about what you want in terms of specific, identifiable outcomes for yourself, your subordinate, and the organization.
2. Plan what you intend to say and how you intend to conduct the meeting, according to the particular strategy you will use.
3. Have the strategy in mind as you engage the individual, but keep it in the background.

Supportive Feedback Strategy

The following steps are suggested as a strategy for supportive feedback:

1. *Acknowledge the specific action and result to be reinforced*. Immediately let the subordinate know that you are pleased about something he or she did. Be specific and describe the event in behavioral terms. "You finished the project (*action*) on time (*result*)."

2. *Explain the effects of the accomplishment and state your appreciation*. For the behavior to be reinforced, the person must be able to see the effects of that behavior in specific, observable ways. Your appreciation is important but as an additional reinforcing element. The main reinforcement is the effect. "It was a major factor in getting the contract (*effect*), and I am pleased with your outstanding work (*appreciation*)."

3. *Help the subordinate to take full responsibility for the success*. If the employee acknowledges the feedback, this step is accomplished. If the employee seems overly modest, more work is needed. Unless he or she can, to some degree, internalize the success and receive satisfaction from it, very little growth will occur. One approach would be to ask how the success was accomplished or if any problems were encountered and how they were overcome. In talking about what happened, the employee is likely to

realize how much he or she was really responsible for. It is important for both you and the employee to hear how the success was accomplished.

4. *Ask if the subordinate wants to talk about anything else*. While the employee is feeling positive and knows that you are appreciative and receptive, he or she may be willing to open up about other issues. The positive energy created by this meeting can be directed toward other work-related issues, so take advantage of the opportunity.

5. *Thank the subordinate for the good performance*. The final step, again thanking the subordinate for the accomplishment, assures that your appreciation will be uppermost in his or her mind as he or she leaves and returns to the work setting.

Corrective Feedback Strategy

The following steps are suggested as a strategy for corrective feedback:

1. *Immediately describe the event in behavioral terms and explain the effect*. Relate clearly in specific, observable, and behavioral terms the nature of the failure or behavior and the effect of the failure or behavior or the work group or organization. If you can appropriately say something to reduce the employee's embarrassment, the employee is more likely to accept the feedback nondefensively.

2. *Ask what happened*. Before assuming that the subordinate is at fault, ask what happened. In many instances, the subordinate is not at fault or is only partially responsible. At the worst, the employee is given an opportunity to explain before you proceed; at the best, you may receive information that would prevent you from censuring the employee.

3. *Help the subordinate to take full responsibility for the actions*. The more time spent in step 2 (finding out what happened), the easier step 3 will be. The subordinate needs to learn from the experience in order to reduce the probability of a reoccurrence. Unless this step is handled effectively, the subordinate will see himself or herself as a victim, rather than as someone who made a mistake and is willing to correct it.

4. *Develop a plan to deal with the issues*. Once the subordinate has accepted responsibility, the next step is to help rectify the situation. Now that the employee is willing to be accountable for errors, you can jointly devise a plan that will help eliminate them. That is, both of you must agree to take action. If you both want the same thing (i.e., better performance from the subordinate), then both of you are obligated to do something about it. This is also an excellent opportunity to build on the subordinate's strengths (e.g., "I'd like for you to show the same fine attention to safety regulations that you show to job specifications").

5. *State your confidence in the subordinate's ability*. Once the issue is resolved, end the session by stating your confidence in the ability of the employee to handle the situation. The object is to allow the subordinate to re-enter the work setting feeling as optimistic about himself as the situation permits. The subordinate must also understand that you will follow up and give additional feedback when the situation warrants it.

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"I" MESSAGES

"I" messages for expressing feelings and accepting responsibility for your feelings.

This is one of the most important skills you can acquire. A good rule of thumb is: "If you have a problem, make an 'I' statement. If you are helping someone with a problem, make empathy responses." An "I" statement consists of a description of how you feel and an indication of the conditions under which you feel that way. It takes this form: "I feel *(your emotions)* when *(under what conditions)*."

It will be helpful if you recognize how many decisions *you* have made in the process of becoming emotional or upset. We have already discussed how feelings develop in great detail in chapters 5, 6, 7 and 8. Also chapter 12 reviews how emotions develop and explains how we understand (make sense out of) our own internal emotional reactions by observing the circumstances we are in, i.e. "I am mad because you seem to be neglecting me" or "I am scared (or excited) in front of a large audience." Building on this cognitive approach, David Johnson (1981) says several things must happen--your decisions--before feelings get communicated: (1) we must perceive what is going on, (2) we interpret, rightly or wrongly, the situation (what is motivating the other person's actions, are those causes good or bad?), (3) we use our view of the situation--our interpretation of why the other person did whatever he/she did--to decide exactly what it is we are feeling, (4) our feelings prompt us to take some kind of action, but (5) our intentions (to hurt, to avoid, to help, etc.) determine how our feelings actually get expressed or handled. (6) Finally, as discussed in chapter 12, we may decide to conceal our feelings, deny them, repress them, convert them into physical symptoms, blame others and demand that others change, or express them inappropriately or appropriately, as in self-disclosure or "I" statements. Or, of course, if we don't like our feelings, we can try to change them (see chapters 12 and 14). There are lots of places in this getting-upset process where we alone are responsible for the choices we make (although we are often tempted to blame someone else for upsetting us).

In short, from the cognitive viewpoint, how we handle our feelings is based on *our* perceptions, *our* attributions, *our* understanding of what we are feeling, and *our* intentions. Thus, as humanistic-existentialistic therapists have also contended for a long time, *we are responsible* for our feelings, because *we have chosen*, through each of 5 or 6 steps, to feel whatever we feel (no matter how miserable), so we must "own" our feelings. In short, no one can *make* us feel any way; we decide. (Note: Freudians, learning theorists, sociobiologists, drug-oriented psychiatrists, physiologists with interests in hormones, genes and neurotransmitters, and many others may not agree with this highly conscious, cognitive explanation of emotions.)

Regardless of the etiology of feelings, suppressing or denying our feelings may lead to several problems: (1) increased irritability and conflicts with others, (2) difficulty resolving interpersonal problems (being "logical" doesn't mean ignoring feelings, but dealing with them), (3) distorted perception and blind spots (like seeing only the bad parts of a person we are mad at) in a relationship, and (4) other people may suspect we have feelings and ask us to be honest with them (which is hard to do if we are being dishonest with ourselves--or unaware). These are good reasons for expressing our feelings in a tactful, constructive manner. "I" statements serve this purpose.

"I" statements do not judge, blame, threaten, put down or try to control others; they simply report how you feel, which is rarely challengeable by anyone else. When you make an "I" statement, you are taking responsibility for your emotions. "I" statements inform others about your feelings and, thus, may lead to change, but they do not demand change or direct others. They leave the other person responsible and free to decide if he/she will change to accommodate your needs.

Purposes

Consider using "I" statements:

- Any time you want to share your feelings or desires in a frank, unthreatening, undemanding way. When you are trying to disclose more about yourself to build a relationship.
- Any time stress is experienced in a relationship, especially if you are feeling angry or dissatisfied or if the other person is resistive to changing in response to your requests or demands.
- If both parties have problems, i.e. both of you can take turns giving "I" statements and giving empathy responses.
- If the other person is using a lot of "you" (blaming, critical) statements, try to translate them into "I" statements and empathize with the accuser's feelings.

Steps

STEP ONE: **Understand when to use and how to use "I" statements in place of "you" statements and other harmful statements**.

In order to communicate our feelings clearly, we must, of course, be aware of them, comfortable or at least accepting of them, and able to accurately express the feelings in words. When we lack this awareness, acceptance, or verbal skill, our feelings are likely to be expressed indirectly and ineffectively, as in these "you" statements (adapted partly from Johnson, 1981): (See Next Page)

You statements	**"I" statements**
Blaming: "You make me so mad."	"I feel angry when you _____." Or, "I have chosen to let it bother me when you _____."
Judging or labeling: "You are an inconsiderate, hostile, arrogant creep."	"I feel betrayed when you criticize me in front of others."
Accusing: "You don't give a damn about me!"	"I feel neglected when you avoid me."
Ordering: "You shut up!"	"I feel annoyed when you call me names and make fun of me."
Questioning: "Are you always this flirtatious?" or "Why did you do that? I feel like slapping your face."	"I really feel insecure about our relationship when you flirt."
Arguing: "You don't know what you are talking about."	"I feel convinced it is this way."
Sarcasm: "Of course, you are an expert!"	"I would like you a lot more if you were a bit more humble."
Approving: "You are wonderful." "You are attractive."	"I really am impressed with your _____ and besides I like you. I am attracted to you."
Disapproval: "You are terrible."	"I feel crushed when you seem only interested in spending my money."
Threatening: "You had better..."	"I'd like it if you'd ..."
Moralizing: "You ought to ..."	"I think it would be fair for you to..."
Treating: "You need to rest and..."	"I'd like to be helpful to you."
Supporting: "It will get better."	"I'm sorry you feel ..."
Analyzing: "You can't stand to leave your mother!"	"I'm disappointed that you are so reluctant to leave..."

Note that many of the "you" statements are intended to exert power, to control, to intimidate, or to put down the other person. They are not statements made by non-judgmental, mutually respecting equals. They are authoritarian statements made by manipulators. That's why Gordon (1975) recommended "I" statements to parents when talking to children. Watch out for "you" statements.

Personal responsibility is avoided in other ways too: we use "we," "it" or "they" when we are trying to depersonalize our comment and/or vaguely conceal our feelings or opinions. Sometimes we use "we" when trying to make it sound like a lot of people agree with us, while in reality no one has authorized us to speak for them. We should take responsibility for expressing our own opinions or feelings.

Examples:

We, it, they statements	**"I" statements**
"Most people would have an affair if they wouldn't get caught."	"I would have an affair if..."
"The group isn't interested in ..."	"I don't think the group cares..."
"The glass slipped out of my hand."	"I dropped the glass."
"People have a hard time with math."	"I am ashamed of my math score."
"The group is trying to help you."	"I want to understand you but I'm having a hard time."
"This weather is depressing."	"I feel depressed."
"This class is boring."	"I feel bored."

The last example above shows how our language also causes us problems. It is important to be aware that *personal opinions sound like facts* when one uses a form of "am" or "is," such as "you are...," "I am...," "it is..." and so on. Furthermore, in addition to sounding factual, such statements imply the whole person is a certain way and will be forever. Example: "You are selfish" is a pronouncement which implies that there are no unselfish traits anywhere in the person's personality--and that the entire person will stay that way forever. This is probably untrue; it is an over-generalization. It would be much more accurate and effective to say, "I resent it when you make plans for the entire family without asking what the rest of us want to do."

When personal opinions are stated as facts, it is no wonder that arguments arise. Note the use of "is" in this example:

Person A: "This class *is* a lot of work but it contains useful information."

Person B: "This class *is* a complete waste of time."

These two people could debate the merits and faults of the class for an hour. It could degenerate into a personal conflict, like "You're the teacher's pet" and "You wouldn't like anything that required a brain" and go on and on. On the other hand, if A and B had made "I" statements there would have been no argument.

Person A: "I really like the self-help class, especially the group."

> **Person B**: "I'm disappointed in that class because I'm not getting anything out of my group or those ridiculously long readings."

In this case, A and B can see that they have responded very differently to the same class. There can be no argument about that. The class isn't inevitably great or terrible; it meets many peoples' needs but not everyone's. After the "I" statements, A and B could discuss their differences and learn more about themselves, each other, their groups, and the class.

In summary,

- An "I" statement may have 2 to 4 parts: (a) it is a self-disclosure, referring to "I," "me" or "my," (b) it expresses a feeling, urge or impulse, (c) it may describe the other person's behavior which is related to your feelings, and (d) it may indicate what you would like to see changed, much like an assertive statement.
- Assume responsibility for your feelings and opinions, don't hide behind the "it" or the editorial "we."
- Avoid stating personal opinions as facts and avoid the over-generalizations sometimes implied by forms of the verb "to be," like "are," "is," "am" and so on..

Clearly, giving an "I" statement is more constructive than giving an order, an accusation, a moral judgment, and so on. However, this is not an easy concept to grasp. The pronoun "you" is used all the time, many uses are not bad. Try to become aware of the undesirable ways you use "you."

STEP TWO: **Look for opportunities to use "I" statements**.

Review the examples of "you" and "we" statements above and see if any remind you of possible situations in your life. If so, make some notes on how you could handle such situations differently in the future and perhaps plan to arrange an opportunity to try out "I" statements.

Pay special attention to stressful relationships or when you want to communicate in sensitive areas, such as sex, anger, submissiveness and others.

Look over the purposes mentioned above. Do any apply to you? If so, give some thought to how you can handle the situations better.

STEP THREE: **Practice giving "I" messages in your daily conversations**.

Most of us (me too!) find it hard to change our speech patterns. We feel awkward. "I" statements seem counter to what we have been taught in English classes, "Don't say I, I, I." We are self-conscious about focusing on ourselves. It takes practice to get comfortable with "I" statements. Role-playing (method #1) may be a good way to start seeing how well they work.

Keep watching for opportunities in casual conversations to express a feeling or an opinion tactfully. Act quickly, as soon as you are aware of a feeling say, "I am feeling..." Most people are interested in genuine feelings, especially if the feelings involve them. It is nourishment for growing friendships. Tell yourself that one of the best ways to resolve a conflict is for all relevant factors to be considered in

arriving at a "no-lose" solution (see method #10). Your feelings, needs, and preferences are important factors! So are the other person's. Feelings have to be shared, diplomatically.

Time involved

The idea of an "I" statement is easy, monitoring your thinking and speech to catch blaming, judging, controlling "you" statements is not easy. This takes time. If you have a problem in this area and carefully concentrated on it for a week, you would be expressing yourself differently.

Common problems

Many of us experience such strong (unexpressed) needs to be blameless, to blame the circumstances or others, to change others and so on, that it is difficult to avoid using whatever "power" we think we have to control others. "You" statements seem to come naturally.

If you decide to openly disclose some strong feelings, many people will quickly urge you to suppress your feelings. For example, if you tell a person, "I'm really depressed," the person is likely to say, "Cheer up!" or, in other words, "Don't talk about it." Strong emotions make some people uncomfortable; disclose slowly with them.

It is quite common for a beginning psychology participant to become so obsessed with what words he/she is using that the concern with how-to-say-it is inhibiting. A learner can lose his/her emotional spontaneity for a while, until the new skill is well learned. Later, you will be a better communicator of feelings than ever before--at least more clear and tactful. Another confusion is that empathy responses (method #2) are often "you" statements. However, "you feel..." in empathy is a tentative, inquiring statement, whereas "you are..." statements are dogmatic oversimplifications. There is a big difference in intent, if not in actual words.

In some cases, depending in part on your tone of voice and demeanor, an "I" statement may not differ greatly from a "you" statement. If a parent yells, "I feel furious and want to beat the hell out of you when you don't do your work and get smartalecky," this is similar to "You are a smart-mouthed, defiant little punk." Blame is clearly indicated in this angry "I" statement, and it certainly makes demands on the child. This can become a power struggle. Ideally, non-blaming "I" statements should lead into problem-solving and better relations. A no-lose approach would work better (see method #10).

Effectiveness, advantages and dangers

There is little or no research assessing the effectiveness of this method, although several writers praise it, as I do.

There are certain apparent advantages as mentioned above. "I" statements do not offend as much; they may reduce defiance and encourage compliance. Also, as you formulate "I" statements in your own head, you become more aware of your true feelings. Likewise, explaining yourself to another person often clears up your own thinking and views about a troublesome situation.

"I" statements are more likely to improve a relationship, certainly better than demanding, whining, asking accusatory questions, manipulating, accusing, and criticizing will do. There are no known dangers, except the problems mentioned in e above.

Additional readings:

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Working Together with I-messages
By Linda Adams
President, Gordon Training International

In the last column, I discussed the importance of empathic listening when another person, team member, friend, child, signals that they have a problem that's interfering with their ability to do productive work or has blocked them from moving forward effectively. What if the situation is reversed and you are the one with the problem? Now you need to know how to help yourself. When someone's behavior is causing you a problem, how can you influence that person to change without causing them to lose face or feel resentment toward you?

For example, your team member has been late for several important meetings. Your co-worker has volunteered to do some tasks, but hasn't followed through. Another manager is causing your organization to miss a very important deadline. We could say that these and many other behaviors cause you a problem because they interfere with your getting your needs met, i.e., getting your job done in these cases.

These situations require an entirely different skill than when you are attempting to help another with their problem, then you're a counselor, a listener, you want to help the other person. When you have the problem, you're a sender, an influencer, you want to help yourself. This means you'll want to be assertive, self-disclosing, giving the other person information that will help them better understand your problem with their behavior.

Assertive skills are distinctly different from listening skills and they can be much more difficult for people to use. That's because almost all of us are reluctant to tell other people that their behavior is creating a problem for us, nobody likes to hear that. We run the risk that they will feel hurt, get angry or not like us. For some leaders, this risk is so great that they simply do not confront their team members.

But there's a huge price to pay for such silence, the problem does not get dealt with and solved, the other person is left in the dark and the leader builds up resentment. And the relationship stays or becomes inauthentic.

Fear of Confrontation

Almost all of us have had bad experiences of being confronted throughout our lives beginning with our parents and teachers. Most often, the way we were confronted caused us to feel upset and resistant. In our courses, we refer to this kind of confrontation as a You-message because it places blame on the other person, 'You're late', 'You're inconsiderate', 'You should be more responsible', 'Here's what you need to do'. Not only do these You-messages fail to influence the other person to change the behavior that's creating a problem for you, they have the added effect of damaging the relationship.

Since it is you who have the problem, it's essential that you take ownership of it, it's you who are worried, upset, frustrated or concerned. Now your posture is one of being assertive, self-disclosing, open, honest, direct with your team members and others in your life. Now is the time for an I-message*, 'I'm disappointed', 'I'm concerned', 'I am so frustrated'. The 'feeling' part of the I-message is essential, but it's not enough. It's also very important to let the other person know the behavior that is creating the problem and then to tell them the tangible and concrete effect that behavior has on you.

I-message Examples

1. To your team member:

'I get very upset (feeling) when inquiries from potential clients aren't being answered within the time frame we agreed on (non-blameful description of the specific unacceptable behavior) because I'm afraid

we'll lose some business and also create a bad impression of our organization (tangible effect).'

2. To your co-worker:

'When I get interrupted during my presentation (non-blameful description of the specific unacceptable behavior), I feel frustrated (feeling) because it breaks my concentration and I might forget something (tangible effect).'

3. To your teenager:

'When the gas tank was left almost empty (non-blameful description of the specific unacceptable behavior), I was upset (feeling) because I had to stop and get gas and that made me late for work (tangible effect).'

4. And here's an actual one that I received earlier in the week from a co-worker:

'It's August 23 and I don't see any sign of the August Working Together newsletter article being worked on and I'm concerned that the newsletter won't get sent out on time to our clients who find it valuable and useful. It's also an effective marketing piece for us.'

Needless to say, this message got my attention and prompted me to meet the deadline that we had previously agreed on.

A simple way to remember the three parts is 'Where's the BEF?' (Behavior, Effect, Feeling). Note that the order doesn't matter, but it is important to include all three parts. Usually it's not enough to describe the other person's behavior and tell them you're upset about it; they need to know why.

Learning to talk to other people using I-messages is not easy because it requires a shift in the way we normally think and talk and also because it takes courage. The payoff in developing the courage to approach others with I-messages is that being transparently real with team members, spouses, children and others can be the beginning of an authentic relationship, one in which both learn to be open and honest with each other.

**The three-part I-message was created by Thomas Gordon.*

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I-Messages and You-Messages

By
Heidi Burgess

October 2003

One of the easiest ways to defuse an interpersonal conflict is to avoid accusatory or escalatory language. One way to do this is by using statements about yourself and your feelings (called "I-messages" because they start with "I feel" or "I felt"), instead of "you-messages," which start with an accusation, such as, "You did this (bad thing)," or, "You are (another bad thing)."

The Upside of I-Messages

In other words, if you say, "I felt let down," rather than, "You broke your promise," you will convey the same information. But you will do so in a way that is less likely to provoke a defensive or hostile reaction from your opponent.

You-messages suggest blame, and encourage the recipient to deny wrong-doing or to blame back. For example, if you say, "You broke your promise," the answer is likely to be, "No, I didn't," which sets you up for a lengthy argument, or, "Well, you did, too," which also continues the conflict.

I-messages simply state a problem, without blaming someone for it. This makes it easier for the other side to help solve the problem, without having to admit that they were wrong (see also saving face).

Remembering to use I-messages can be difficult, however, because many people are not used to talking about themselves or their feelings (and in some cultures, this would be highly inappropriate).

In addition, when we are in a conflict -- especially an escalated conflict -- there is a very strong tendency to blame many of one's problems on the other side. So stating the problem in terms of a "you-message" is much more natural, and is more consistent with one's view of the problem. But by making the effort to change one's language, one can also reframe the way one thinks about the conflict, increasing the likelihood that a resolution can be found.

The Downside of I-Messages

I-messages can be manipulative, and can give the recipient the impression that it is their responsibility to make sure that the other person is always happy. In an interesting essay entitled, "What's Wrong with I-Messages," Jane Bluestein argues that I-messages "are frequently used in ways that produce negative and unwanted results."[1] The problem occurs, Bluestein argues, when we use I-messages to try to control or change someone. For example, if you say, "I feel unhappy when you are late," you are really blaming the other for being late, and trying to get them to change their behavior. The focus of Bluestein's article is on parent-child relationships and communication, where she says that "I-statements make the child responsible for the parents' state of mind and convey the impression to the child that he somehow has the power to control how Mommy and Daddy act and feel."[2] This suggests that power relationships affect the use of I-messages. While equals would probably understand that they are not broadly responsible for the other's state of mind -- but just need to work out a solution to a specific problem -- a child or a person

who feels greatly over-powered or out-ranked by another person may not recognize that. So I-messages, while useful in many circumstances, should be used with care regarding how they are received and interpreted (see active listening).

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[1] Jane Bluestein, "What's Wrong with I-Messages," available online at http://www.nhny.org/i_messages.htm (accessed September 15, 2003).

[2] Ibid.

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Sources of Additional, In-depth Information on this Topic

Additional Explanations of the Underlying Concepts:

Online (Web) Sources

Bluestein, Jane. *What's Wrong with "I-Messages"?*.
Available at: http://66.175.44.246/ece/ece_frameset.html.
This essay argues that I-messages are manipulative and often do more harm than good.

Perry, Susan K. *You'd Better Like "I-Messages" (Or Else!)*.
Available at: http://www.couplescompany.com/Advice/Mark/Imessages.pdf.
This essay echoes some of the reservations expressed by Jane Bluestein in her article criticizing I-messages. However, this article also discusses how I-messages can be used effectively between husband and wife or other equal couples.

Offline (Print) Sources

Ury, William L. *Getting Past No: Negotiating With Difficult People*. New York: Bantam Books, January 1, 1993.
This book provides step by step approaches to defusing confrontation and developing creative solutions toward resolving conflicts through negotiation. In particular, it focuses on developing communication skills that facilitate cooperation. I-messages are one of the techniques discussed as a way to get through difficult situations. Click here for more info.

Kirshenbaum, Mira and Charles Foster. *Parent-Teen Breakthrough: The Relationship Approach, Reissue Edition*. New York: Plume, 1995.
This book provides advice and guidance on how to build a respectful and loving relationship between parent and teenager. The book includes sample dialogues and practical suggestions for developing these relationships.

Gordon, Thomas. *Parent Effectiveness Training: The Proven Program for Raising Responsible Children* . New York: Three Rivers Press, October 2000.
This recent edition of this classic work on Parent Effectiveness Training teaches parents how to communicate effectively with their children and how to resolve family conflicts. The book contains a very early (perhaps the earliest) description of I-messages and how they may be used.

TRANSCENDENCE THEORY

One of the most significant ways in which individuals differ is in their means of managing the dissonance that inevitably occurs in their lives, *i.e*., an individual's emotional system functions smoothly until such factors as conflict, thwarting of expectations, threats to self esteem, and being confronted with the hostility of others create emotional disharmony. This paper attempts to explore responses to dissonance and to suggest a model for conceptualizing growthful and life-enriching functional accommodations to that inevitable dissonance.

Conflict-engendered dissonance, probably the most prevalent type, is the least easily managed. The Judeo-Christian ethic fosters a pattern of passive-aggressive responses by promoting "turning-the-other-cheek," conflict avoidance, and an attempt to deny the emotional reality of the dissonance. In fact, Western culture engenders guilt in individuals who are unable to manage conflict in the "Christian" manner. It places a potent moral value on pseudo-acceptance rather than open manifestation of hostility. This adjustment, which appears on the surface to be accepting, is, in fact, a system-exhausting suppression of hostility. For the purposes of the transcendence model, this state of passive-aggressive response to dissonance is labeled Level I.

It is at this level of accommodation that most individuals enter a human relations training group. Frequently, the goal of the group is centered around freeing members from the constrictions of their Level I responses in order that they may learn the ability to express hostility overtly. For most group members, this is a difficult step and a true achievement if they find that they are able to respond openly to conflict. For most individuals it means overcoming an ingrained behavior pattern and frequently produces an exhilarating sense of freedom. Much of the euphoria experienced by individuals in their first human relations growth group is a result of the release from the discomfort of suppressed hostility.

It is appropriate that this goal of open expression of emotion should be sought after in the human relations training group, and the trainer who focuses on helping individuals move to Level II responses - overt expression of hostility - is facilitating the growth process. However, the ability to express overt hostility is too often seen as an end product rather than as a means to an end. Progressing from a Level I response to a Level II response is a meaningful and necessary step in an individual opening himself to more self-actualizing behavior. The immediate response to conflict, even though it may only take the form of a cathartic release of emotional toxin, is growthful. There is, however, the potential for an individual to transcend to a more constructive response pattern, Level III - introspective sharing.

To illustrate the three levels of response, we will examine a situation which has high potential for conflict-engendered dissonance: a circumstance involving a lack of punctuality. If I make an appointment with someone for three o'clock and he arrives at three-thirty, I have, according to the transcendence model, three response choices. The conventional response, definitely Level I, is for me to attempt not to show my anger. I may even enter into the "excuse" interaction by being supportive, e.g., reassuring the late comer that I "understand" that "those things" happen or that I have had the

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same experience myself. However, the hostility which was building up from 3:01 until 3:29 cannot be dissipated by "forgiving" the lateness. It is, at best, suppressed. If I respond to the situation at Level II, I will be openly angry, vent my feelings, and clear my system of the hostility. However, my Level II response does not take the other person's needs into account, and it does not help me understand why the lack of punctuality has upset me so much. My system can be emptied of anger, but I have nothing positive with which to replace it. Moreover, I have probably made the person who has come late angry and/or defensive. He must in turn choose a response. His choice may be Level I, to suppress his anger, in which case it will be difficult for him to function smoothly with me. He may also choose to vent his hostility. What can result is that a potentially important issue for the parties involved will be reduced to "blowing off steam."

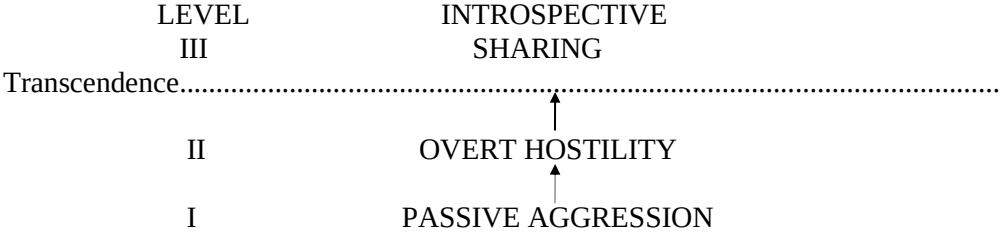
Anger is a secondary emotion; it is impotent in that it can supply no data other than the empirical fact of emotional upset. It is imperative that the anger be "turned over" to reveal the primary emotion behind it. In order to find the real issues and deal with them in a productive way, I need to respond on Level III - introspective sharing. If I can keep from suppressing my hostility and can further resist the temptation to dissipate my hostility by becoming openly angry, then, by sharing the fact that I am upset, we can explore together what my concerns really are. What may be revealed by our exchange is that I interpret the other person's lateness as a message from him that I am not a valuable person, not worthwhile and not important. For me, this is a highly threatening implication which may be alleviated by sharing my concerns about my relative worth. The result may be more than just a resolution of the conflict; it may be a growthful resolution.

If I can begin to respond to dissonance with introspective sharing, then I am no longer limited to Level I responses. Revelation of hostile feelings is no longer guilt-inducing or threatening to me. Furthermore, I have transcended the need for Level II responses, although I have learned that I need no longer fear releasing the natural hostility I feel from conflict-engendered dissonance. More importantly, I know that I am no longer uncomfortable about telling others "where I am" emotionally when I am feeling hostile. However, I cannot go from responding at Level I to responding at Level III without first developing the ability to respond at Level II. A Level I person is not able to reveal to another that the hostile feelings exist. He may, in fact, not be able to admit their existence to himself; therefore, there is no way to share feelings which, in one way or another, are being denied.

The weakness of the existing model of human relations group experience results from the too frequent assumption that to master the ability to overtly express feeling data (hostility in particular) is "to arrive" in human potential sense. This goal is desirable but is only the second of three possible levels of response. Only by learning the intermediate ability are we able to transcend to the more constructive level of response as indicated in Figure 1.

Figure 1

ACCOMMODATION OF DISSONANCE



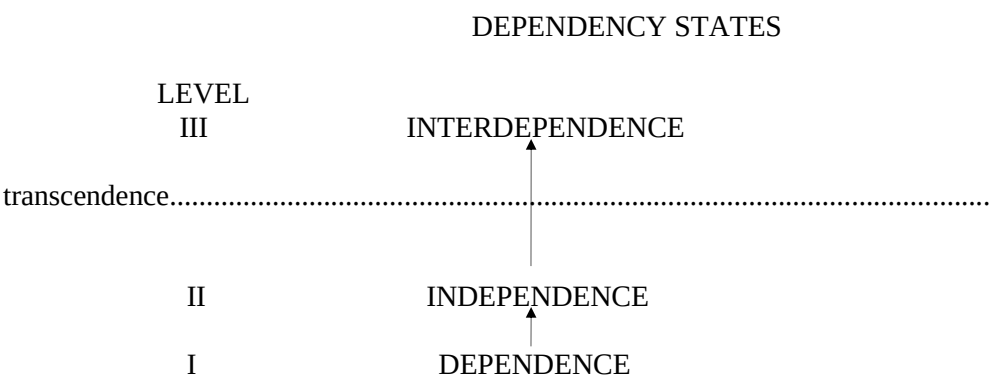
The Myth of Independence

The concept of transcendence is generalizable to other human interaction models. One thrust of human relations training is toward making individuals more independent of others. The dependent person does not take risks for fear of upsetting the dependent relationship he nurtures. Without risk-taking, an individual cannot really grow because he is not free to experiment with behaviors which might provide the means through which he can grow. If the individual is able to move from dependence to independence, then he moves from a state of necessarily high trust to a state of extremely low trust. If he is independent of others, he is self-sustaining and need not trust others for comfort, security, love, or other needs. Independence precludes involvement with others, which might necessitate trust. It is "his own thing," and he alone is responsible for it. Moving from a state of child-like, must-trust-for-survival dependence upon others (the point at which many people enter a human relations group) to a state of independence is a very positive step. It allows the person to risk the rejection or displeasure of others because he is not dependent upon them. This risk-taking often takes the form of freedom to express feelings both verbally and nonverbally. In the joy of his new-found freedom, the newly independent person feels sure that he has come to terms with the world in the most effective way possible, often with disastrous results when he reenters his "real" world after the experience of a human relations training group.

In a sense, once the individual has taken the risk to become independent, his behavior no longer can be considered risk-taking since he has "nothing" (his dependent relationships) to lose by his free expression of himself. His behavior, which may seem to dependent people to be risky, is, in fact, "riskless."

As in the model of transcendence as it relates to dissonance (Figure 1), the dependent state may be labeled Level I, in parallel with the passive-aggressive state, and the independent state, Level II, in parallel with the overtly-hostile state. Level III, then, is the state of interdependence, in which the person is sometimes dependent and sometimes depended-upon. (See Figure 2.)

Figure 2



Interdependence is central to Gibb's TORI Theory and is the essential state to which individuals must transcend in order to function most productively in terms of their own needs and the needs of others. As with the parallel state, introspective sharing, the individual cannot go immediately from a state of dependence to a state of interdependence. A dependent person who has never experienced independence is not aware that he has the strength that will allow him to sustain another who needs to be dependent for a time.

Level II has limitations which are very pronounced in terms of sustaining interpersonal relationships with others because the Level II person functions without others. It is only when he transcends to Level III that his caring for others can become caring involvement. Therefore, on Level I, the dependent person lets others care for him but often does not risk expressing his own caring for fear of rejection. When he proceeds to Level II, he can risk expressing his caring; however, he does not trust others enough to allow himself to become vulnerable (in the way he was in his dependent state) by acknowledging his need for being cared for. When he becomes sure of himself in his independent state, he may transcend to interdependence, in which he can become involved in relationships with others in which each depends upon the other for caring and each feels secure in expressing caring. As in the three levels of accommodation of dissonance, the interdependent individual has transcended his need for independence and has moved to a more productive level. Again, it is often the goal in human relations training groups to facilitate independence, and this is a desirable goal; however, it cannot be the end of growth, but merely an important step in the process toward self-actualization.

Transcendence in Transactional Analysis

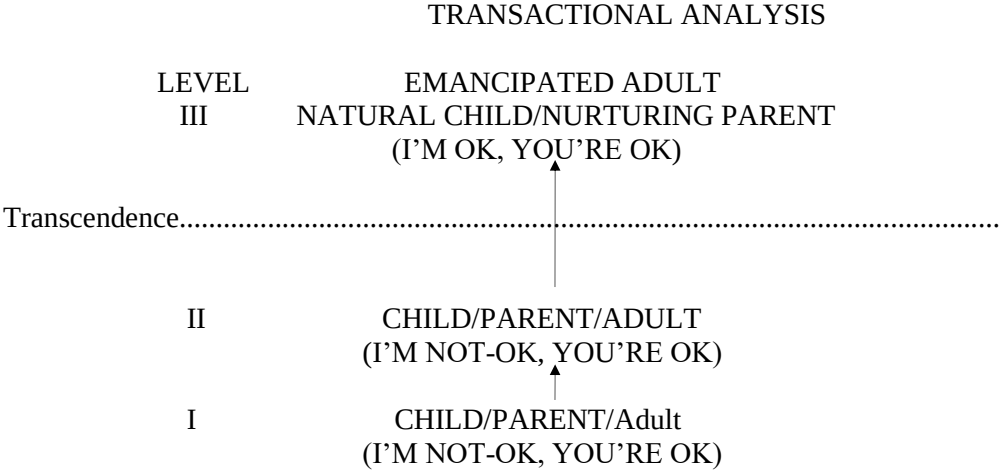
In a third human interaction model, transactional analysis, Level 1 can be thought of as the state in which the individual usually has either his *Child* or his *Parent* in control. (His *Adult* exists and is functioning, but it is not well-developed.) The existential position is "I'm not-OK, You're OK." Since the "not-OK" *Child* is the primary factor in determining the individual's behavior he will probably respond to dissonance in a passive-aggressive way. He cannot risk open hostility with his *Parent* or the *Parent* in others. His archaic *Parent* "tapes" produced by Judeo-Christian ethical demands caution him: "It's not nice to fight!" "Don't argue, just do as you're told!" "I know what's best!" These directives reconfirm his being "not-OK" and leave him frustrated and angry, but silent.

If the *Adult* in the individual has been allowed to develop and is processing reality in an efficient manner, he may transcend to Level II. On this level his *Adult* discovers that there are times for open expression of hostility and that, realistically, the individual cannot be productive if he is continually in the dependent, "not-OK" mode. Therefore, the now-stronger *Adult* will be in control on those occasions when the data of the situation indicate that the dissonance should be acted upon. The *Adult* makes it possible for the *Child* to risk the parental disapproval of both the *Parent* within himself and *Parent* within those with whom he is in conflict. At this second level, the existential positions remains "I'm not-OK, You're OK," though the *Parent* may manifest "I'm OK, You're not-OK" in the games the individual plays to help take the pressure off the "not-OK" *Child*.

If the *Adult* is processing reality in such a way that the individual is able to redefine his existential positions as "I'm OK, You're OK," he may transcend to Level III - the emancipated *Adult* (Figure 3.) It is at this level that the individual can experience true intimacy and interdependence, which foster introspective sharing.

See Harris, Thomas, I'm OK, You're OK, Harper, New York City, 1969.

Figure 3



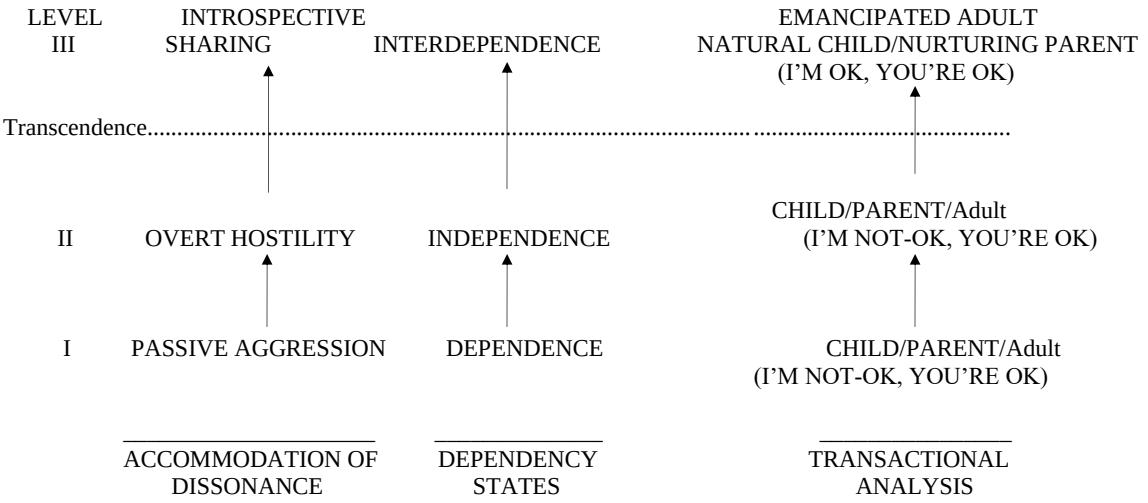
Level III allows the natural *Child* (pre-""not-OK") to emerge once more and encourages the nurturing Parent. Both the natural *Child* and the nurturing *Parent* are healthy elements in an intimate, interdependent relationship with "self" and with others who have transcended to Level III. As in the previous illustrations, the individual must achieve Level II before transcendence to Level III is possible. For the individual to become the emancipated *Adult*, he must first have developed a well-functioning *Adult* at the second level. There is no possibility for the "not-OK" *Child* to become the natural, "OK" *Child* again without the reality testing of a strong *Adult.*

Relating on Levels I, II, and III

Within the conceptual framework of transcendence, true communication or genuine relating can happen only in transactions between individuals at the same level or between those at contiguous levels of functioning. In other words, an individual engaged in introspective sharing on an interdependent, emancipated-Adult level cannot truly communicate with a passive-aggressive, dependent individual whose irrational Child or prejudiced, perhaps punitive Parent is in control: there is no common ground for understanding to occur. A Level II individual is able to communicate with a Level I individual because the "not-OK" Child is a part of both of them: this is their common ground. Likewise, a dependent individual cannot relate in an interdependent way since he is not yet aware of his ability or has not yet developed his ability to function independently. Communication will break down when it is essential for him to perform an independent function within the interchange. He must first share the capability of independence in common with the other individual. Finally, since according to the present theory, the passive-aggressive individual denies his hostile feelings, he cannot communicate with an individual who needs to share feelings of hostility in order to achieve an introspective level of conflict resolution. Figure 4 illustrates parallel nature of the three models of transcendence.

Figure 4

TRANSCENDENCE MODELS



Conclusion

Transcendence may be viewed in light of an adolescent's rites of passage. He asserts his independence and becomes overtly hostile when conflicted. He is, however, still essentially a child who is slowly developing a discerning, responsible, decision-making capability that will finally result in his becoming mature. He is actively testing and sorting through all the ethics, mores, and disciplines that he has been asked to take for granted from birth. From time to time he may appear to be rejecting the valuable with the worthless, the proven judgments with the prejudices. He "trusts no one over thirty" and trusts peers only as projections of himself. Yet, without this turmoil, which is in effect a complex computer program which must somehow be made to "run," there is no way for his emergence to be complete. If the process is thwarted, the individual may never reach Level II, the keystone to maturity, much less Level III, where personal fulfillment lies.

The human relations training group facilitator must continue to focus on the development of Level II capabilities in participants since this is an essential step in the self-actualizing process. However, he needs also to introduce the concept of Level III responses and work toward this goal with those participants who are ready to make the transcendence.